

# For Whom the Ontology Turns

## Theorizing the Digital Real

by Tom Boellstorff

A diverse body of work known as the “ontological turn” has made important contributions to anthropological theory. In this article, I build on this work to address one of the most important theoretical and political issues haunting contemporary theories of technology: the opposition of the “digital” to the “real.” This fundamentally misrepresents the relationship between the online and offline, in both directions. First, it flies in the face of the myriad ways that the online is real. Second (and just as problematically), it implies that everything physical is real. Work in the ontological turn can help correct this misrepresentation regarding the reality of the digital. However, this potential contribution is limited by conceptions of difference the ontological turn shares with the interpretive frameworks it turns against. Drawing on ontological-turn scholarship, my own research, and a range of thinkers, including Tarde, I work to show how an ontological approach that problematizes both similitude and difference provides valuable resources for understanding digital culture as well as for culture theory more generally.

In this article, I explore how certain anthropological debates about being—properly reframed with regard to difference—can provide crucial insights into the reality of the digital. The debates I have in mind commonly go by the moniker “the ontological turn.” Some will roll their eyes at the mere mention of this “turn.” Not only has it been extensively reviewed (Bessire and Bond 2014; Course 2010; Laidlaw 2012; Ramos 2012; Vigh and Sausdal 2014), but there exist reviews of reviews (Pedersen 2012a) and even reviews of reviews of reviews (Laidlaw and Heywood 2013). Yet the ontological turn is more than an academic fad. As an innovative scholarly conversation that need not be relegated to scare quotes, I will argue that it turns for thee. Building on its valuable insights, I will extend (rather than critique) this varied and internally debated body of work as a means to a broader end.

That broader end is responding to a key sticking point in contemporary theories of technology: the false opposition of the digital and the real. This fundamentally misrepresents the relationship between the physical and those phenomena referred to by terms like “digital,” “online,” or “virtual.”<sup>1</sup> It flies in the face of the myriad ways that the online is real (if you learn German online, you can speak it in Germany; if you lose money gambling online, you have fewer dollars). Just as problematically, it also implies that everything physical is real, despite the fact that, depending on one’s definition of real, many aspects of physical world existence are unreal, as in forms of play and fantasy (Bateson 1972).

While documenting the distressingly interdisciplinary character of this false opposition between the digital (or virtual, or online) and real lies beyond the scope of this article, it appears with alarming frequency. One example from a top-notch scholar: Christine Hine framed her important discussion of ethnographic approaches to the “embedded, embodied, and everyday” internet by noting, “I would reject the notion that there is a pre-existing distinction between virtual world and real world” (2015:24). By opposing “virtual world” to “real world” at the outset, Hine predicates her analysis on assuming that the real world is the physical world and, thus, that the virtual is unreal. Another example: when discussing the impact of digital culture on social interaction, Sherry Turkle claimed “people report feeling let down when they move from the virtual to the real world” (2011:12). Virtual and real are placed on a zero-sum continuum such that every step from one is a step to the other. A third example: in *The End of the Virtual* (the millenarian title alone should arouse suspicion), Richard Rogers refers to “grappling with the real and virtual divide” (2009:2). The real lies on one side of this presumed divide; the virtual is defined as unreal.

All these exemplary scholars have distinct theoretical frameworks. If pressed, they—and the staggeringly large number of others who employ the false opposition of digital versus real—would likely concede that the digital can be real. However, conflation of physical with real and digital with unreal, even in rhetorical passing, have devastating consequences for addressing the reality of the digital. Much more than slips of the

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1. These are sometimes usefully assigned differing meanings, but in this article, I treat them as rough synonyms; I follow the same strategy for “difference,” “alterity,” and “Otherness.”

conceptual tongue, these confections reflect deep-seated assumptions about value, legitimacy, and consequence. The ubiquity of analyses based on a presumptive gap “between the virtual and the real” (Elwell 2014:234)—rather than between the virtual and the physical—forecloses comprehensively examining world makings and social constructions of reality in a digital age.

The frankly stunning incidence of otherwise-careful scholars opposing the digital to the real underscores the urgent need to understand precisely how the digital can be real. What are the forms reality takes online, and how are such realities realized? How does this show that the physical is not always real? We need a theory that moves from the false opposition of digital and real to what I whimsically call the “digital reality matrix” (fig. 1). The currently dominant framework accounts for only quadrants *A* and *D*. I seek a more expansive theory that encompasses all four quadrants as well as the multiple and contextual materialities, virtualities, and realities that exceed the heuristics of this synoptic table.

All these questions regarding the real are questions of being, of ontology; as a result, the ontological turn can provide important insights. But this potential is lost if the real is preassigned to one side of a presumed digital versus physical divide. It has become a truism to note that the internet has transformed what ethnographers study and how they study it. But if the sociality in question is unreal, how are we to participate in it and why would we bother?

I seek to lay the groundwork for using ontological-turn scholarship to challenge the conflation of physical with real and digital with unreal. I say “lay the groundwork” because, as it stands, this potential contribution is limited by the role of difference in the ontological turn. Thus, my focus is on the ontological turn and difference as a prolegomenon to rethinking the digital real.

This is not a review essay, but given my goal, it must be deeply citational. My argument will be significantly voiced through quotations from the authors who inspire this analysis to honor their insights and show that I represent their work accurately.<sup>2</sup> These authors come from all sides of the ontological turn. Some are participants, others commentators, and still others are both; some are more central, and others are more peripheral.

After locating the ontological turn conceptually, socially, and politically, I build on my own work to delve more deeply into the question of difference. While I have conducted research on digital culture (specifically, in the virtual world *Second Life*), I have also conducted research on sexuality in Indonesia. When drawing on my own scholarship, I intentionally begin with materials from Indonesia; this might seem surprising, but given my desire to explore how the physical and digital can both be real, my Indonesia research will help contextualize the discussion.

To link these various lines of analysis, following this engagement with my Indonesia and *Second Life* materials, I draw

2. Italics in citations are original.

	PHYSICAL	DIGITAL
REAL	A physical and real	B digital and real
UNREAL	C physical and unreal	D digital and unreal

Figure 1. The digital reality matrix.

on Gabriel Tarde’s discussion of “having.” This will help me reflect on the mutual constitution of being and knowing, leading me to inquire after what I will playfully term a “habeology” of the real (building on the Latin word for “have”). My conclusion—which, given the scope and tone of this article, takes the form of a preliminary provocation rather than a comprehensive claim—is that an analytic of being founded in grids of similitude and difference (rather than in difference in isolation) can contribute to rethinking the digital.

## Ontologies and Turns in Anthropology

Questions of being have always been central to anthropology—for instance, with regard to monogenetic versus polygenetic debates of the nineteenth century, where the notion of a single human race was at stake. This has included a long-standing interest in indigenous or native ontologies (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937; Hallowell 1960; Malinowski 1935; see Kohn 2014). Additionally, in even the earliest anthropological scholarship, questions of being extended beyond the human to spirits, animals, and nonhuman agents. This resonates with much contemporary scholarship on science, technology, and materiality (e.g., Bennett 2009; Brown 2001; Chun 2011; Coole and Frost 2010; Smith 1996).

The ontological turn builds on this history but is of relatively recent provenance: “Since roughly the 1990s, a growing number of anthropologists have become interested in the study of ontology. . . . This generally takes the form of ethnographic accounts of indigenous non-Western modes and models of being, presented in more or less explicit contrast with aspects of a Euro-American or modern ontology imputed to conventional anthropology” (Scott 2013:859). To speak of scholars as part of a single ontological turn is a productive misnomer, since not all those identified as such would identify themselves in that fashion. Additionally, there are schools of thought within the ontological turn. Aside from the ontological turn in science and technology studies (STS; to which I return below), in anthropology, we can distinguish a recursive emphasis on perspective and representation—associated, for instance, with the work of

Viveiros de Castro—and a structural emphasis on relation and typology—associated, for instance, with the work of Philippe Descola (see Latour 2009). This diversity does not mean that the ontological turn is an inappropriate subject of analysis. Within these debates, the differences might seem stark. But as their citation patterns, ethnographic referents, and theoretical underpinnings reveal, there is much that is shared, allowing debate in the first place. Anthropologists necessarily and accurately group people together—Tro브리андers, Runa, scientists in a laboratory, the Darhad people of Northern Mongolia, denizens of Second Life—even as they devote careful attention to distinctions within these groups and engage in comparative analysis (e.g., Descola 2013). Among other topics, anthropologists explore that which is shared; it would be ironic to exempt anthropologists from that very approach.

Many broadly shared features of the ontological turn in anthropology appear in “Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism,” one locus classicus of its explication (Viveiros de Castro 1998). The focus is on “the conception, common to many peoples of [South America], according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view” (469). This “multinaturalism,” understood as “one of the contrastive features of Amerindian thought in relation to Western ‘multiculturalist’ cosmologies” (470), is an “indigenous theory according to which the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world. . . differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves” (470). For instance, certain animals “experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture—they see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish, etc.), they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks etc.) as body decorations or cultural instruments” (470).

Ontological-turn analyses (and many of their critiques) draw primarily from ethnographic work with indigenous groups in South America and inner Asia and often draw on a “virtuoso’s point of view” (Swanutt 2007:238). The discussion often centers, not on Brazilians or Mongolians, but on collectives defined in terms of ethnolocality (Boellstorff 2002), like the Buryat, the Yukaghirs, or the Altays, or defined in comparative ethnolocal terms, like “Amerindian thought” (Viveiros de Castro 1998) or “indigenous ontologies of North Asia” (Pedersen 2001). This recalls the traditional paradigm wherein “the study of a small group of hunter-gatherers, living in the depths of the Amazonian forest, with none of the comforts of modern life—was expected to furnish critical data for the elaboration of grand theories” (Bloch 2013:112).

This locatedness is not a flaw. All scholarship is situated; many of these thinkers address how those they learn from live in contexts “far from any image of a pristine or wild Amazon . . . thoroughly informed by a long and layered colonial history” (Kohn 2013:3). At issue is location work: asking what benefits might accrue from expanding the ethnographic contexts informing the discussion. But keeping anthropologists in our

analytic means that we cannot exempt them from this location work—particularly given the concept of a “turn,” which has not received the same attention as “ontology.”<sup>3</sup>

The earliest notions of a scholarly turn were associated with the hermeneutic turn and linguistic turn in philosophy (Hoy 1993; Ramberg and Gjesdal 2013; Rorty 1967). The German word used was *Kehre*, referring to a sharp turn or bend and, thus, to rotating movement. In French, *tour* implies turn-taking, even a tournament; both meanings show up in English uses of “turn,” though the sense of rotation predominates. Since the 1960s, the number of turns has exploded, including the practice turn, the material turn, the technological turn, and the mobilities turn. Although dismissing this language of a turn is *de rigueur*, it can have helpful entailments (van Heur, Leydesdorff, and Wyatt 2012). Against the persistent myth of the lone scholar, the notion usefully frames inquiry in terms of research community: “a mutual awareness of each other, such that we work, think and write in the atmosphere of that anthropologists’ collegiality” (Carrithers in Carrithers et al. 2010: 160).

One unhelpful entailment is that a turn can imply turning away from something else: in this case, “an epistemological turn, that dominated the last decades of the twentieth century” (Kelly 2014:264; see Paleček and Risjord 2013; Vigh and Sausdal 2014), and particularly the reflexive turn epitomized by *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). The phrase “ontological turn” thus captures only half of a trajectory “from epistemological angst to the ontological turn” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:7; Toren and Pina-Cabral 2009). Some work associated with the ontological turn explicitly seeks to further the lines of inquiry associated with the “crisis of representation.” Unpacking the turn metaphor can be useful in this regard, because with this entailment of turning away from something prior, it can be hard to know when to stop turning; the potential for extension becomes less evident.

These entailments are also caught up in “the sociology of the environment of social anthropologists” (Leach 1984:3). In the essay from which this citation is drawn, Edmund Leach discussed “not only the overwhelming dominance and academic prestige of Oxford and Cambridge but also the conservatism and social arrogance of those who were effectively in control of these two great institutions” (1984:6). Institutions change, but there is certainly value in considering the centrality of a “vaguely defined cohort of mostly Cambridge-associated scholars” to the ontological turn (Pedersen 2012a; see Geismar 2011). Indeed, Cambridge played an important role in defining “fieldwork.” The Cambridge scholar A. C. Haddon brought this notion from zoology into anthropology, helping instigate a persistent hierarchy of field sites wherein those seen to be most different and far away were most valued (Gupta and

3. Not all discussions of ontology are of an ontological turn; for example, while theories of social ontology are sometimes cited in ontological-turn debates, they are distinct (e.g., DeLanda 2006).

Ferguson 1997). Methodologically, this meant that difference became the assumed precondition for fieldwork (Bunzl 2004). While this history is everywhere reworked (including the United Kingdom itself), it nonetheless shapes the ontological turn.

If many scholars involved in the ontological turn turn away from epistemology conceptually, with a nod to Leach, we can ask: who do they turn away from sociologically? The place of the United States, and particularly California, is noteworthy and allows me to locate myself in this analysis. I received my undergraduate and graduate training at Stanford University and have taught my entire career at the University of California, Irvine. In 2013, I was invited to be a visiting faculty member at Cambridge. The intellectual engagement I enjoyed included an invitation to give a lecture. A faculty member introduced me by remarking, “now I know how to pronounce ‘Irvine.’” Sadly, I did not have the presence of mind to return the complement and express gratitude at finally knowing how to pronounce “Cambridge!” But before my employment, I did not know how to pronounce “Irvine” either. It is a young campus, founded only in the late 1960s. More broadly, the massive University of California system (with nearly 13 times the student body of Cambridge) is central to a West Coast intellectual formation that has played a vital role in American anthropology. This formation is shaped by legacies of the frontier and a range of bitter inequalities. While East Coast elites sometimes marginalize its importance, from gold rush wealth to Cold War aerospace and the current Silicon Valley/Hollywood nexus of digital culture, California has been central to maintaining the power of those elites.

While to my knowledge never acknowledged as such, California represents much of what the ontological turn turns away from sociologically: “The ontological turn in anthropology is thus presented as the way out of the epistemological angst of the 1980s. . . . [But] I might . . . try to rescue even the most criticized of usual suspects in this debate, namely ‘the writing culture people’. . . . I am thinking of anthropologists such as George Marcus, James Clifford, [and] Paul Rabinow” (Candea in Carrithers et al. 2010:174). Could it be coincidence that these anthropologists are all presently faculty in the University of California system? How might California anthropology shape the assessment by three Cambridge-trained anthropologists that the ontological turn has been “performed in the shadows of far more flamboyant theoretical gyrations which took place in the 1980s and 1990s under the banner of ‘reflexivity’” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:7)? One can almost see the rainbow banners waving down San Francisco’s streets. I do not equate the intellectually rigorous with the staid. As a gay Californian, I hope my theoretical gyrations will be sufficiently flamboyant to indicate how the ontological turn (which thankfully has its own flamboyance) can speak to the digital real.

In attending to the social contexts of anthropologists, I seek to honor the acknowledgment of research community that is one of the best entailments of the notion of a turn. And just as the indigenous/Western dichotomy dissolves into

fractal complexity on closer examination, so the Cambridge/California dichotomy I identify here is more heuristic than fixed.<sup>4</sup> Many scholars associated with Cambridge continue to produce cutting-edge work on questions of epistemology. Conversely, many anthropologists powerfully exploring questions of ontology are located in the University of California system (e.g., Marisol de la Cadena, Bill Maurer, David Pedersen, Anna Tsing, and Mei Zhan). Key scholars linked to the STS variant of the ontological turn are located in the University of California system as well (e.g., Karen Barad, Geoffrey Bowker, and Donna Haraway). These complex imbrications inform my analysis as it unfolds.

### The Bolt of Difference

Metaphors are not all-determining, but their entailments matter, shaping and revealing pathways of thought and practice. With regard to ontology, the most damaging entailment of the turn metaphor is that turning takes place around an axis, a still center held constant. And true to metaphorical form, there is one “pivotal” thing the ontological turn shares with the interpretive paradigm it ostensibly turns against—difference. Observers have noted how those involved in the ontological turn “want to preserve cultural anthropology’s traditional concern with difference” (Paleček and Risjord 2013:5), because it acts as a foundational presumption regarding the nature of being: “the laudable aim of the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology to take seriously radical difference and alterity. . . . [It] is premised on the notion that anthropologists are fundamentally concerned with alterity” (Heywood 2012: 143). Heywood correctly observed how “difference is to be understood . . . as ontological rather than epistemological, as that between worlds and not worldviews” (143).

The move might be from different worldviews to different worlds, but difference remains. The “conundrums which dogged the anthropological study of cultural difference do not disappear when we shift to an anthropology of ontological alterity” (Candea in Carrithers et al. 2010:179), precisely because ontology is understood as ontological alterity in the first place. When difference is assumed to be “ontological difference” (Alberti in Alberti et al. 2011:896), it is logical to conclude one has “the option of examining alterity as either an epistemological or an ontological phenomenon” (Fowles in Alberti et al. 2011:906), so long as it is understood that there is no option not to examine alterity itself: difference is the pivot around which all sides turn. As I emphasize at several points in this article, many scholars associated with the ontological turn extend lines of inquiry associated with the reflexive paradigm. I hope to further such scholarship that seeks to “take the challenge of relativism to its ultimate conclusion” (Pedersen and Holbraad 2016:19) by underscoring that taking difference as the

4. For instance, Marcus was not in the University of California system when *Writing Culture* was published, though he was deeply collaborating with University of California scholars at the time.



presumed ground on which such extension plays out sells short the significant insights such work has to offer.

In the ontological turn, difference is not established; it is not even really asserted. The “treatment of alterity as the major premise of anthropological analysis” (Holbraad 2012:50) is doxic, a pregiven predicate to inquiry: “ontologically inflected anthropology is abidingly oriented towards the production of difference” (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen, and Holbraad 2014), so that the goal is “to take difference—*alterity*—seriously as the starting point for anthropological analysis” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:12). Note how, in this quotation, the quotation from Heywood above, and several quotations to follow, attention to ontology understood as difference is equated with a “serious” approach. This is a valuable counter to the claim by some thinkers, like Richard Rorty, that there are views that cannot be taken seriously (Viveiros de Castro 2011:130). Against a long tradition in anthropology of treating what interlocutors say as localized case studies for etic analysis, “‘taking seriously’ [involves] a self-imposed suspension of the desire to explicate the other” (Candea 2011:147), such that “taking native thought seriously is to refuse to neutralize it” (Viveiros de Castro 2013: 489). However, if the turn to ontology is a turn to the serious, it is hard not to see interpretation as frivolous. Yet interpretations can be serious; seriousness inheres as well in partial connections between meaning and being, difference and similitude. Conflating ontology with “taking seriously” obviates the serious flamboyance of ontological camp, something that destabilizes the place of difference as the ostensible predicate of the real.

Such destabilization could be helpful for rethinking the digital real, because difference in the ontological turn is the presumed condition of being for the Other: “ontology” usually references “indigenous ontologies” (Pedersen 2001:411) and specifically “the attempt to describe the ontologies of non-Western peoples” (Course 2010:247). Even when addressing contexts taken to be closer to one’s own, the assumption is typically that “one finds just as much difference as one might find in setting sail to farther shores” (Candea 2011:149).

This is a disciplinary (and disciplining) view that “anthropology is alterity that stays alterity or, better, that *becomes* alterity, since anthropology is a conceptual practice whose aim is to make alterity reveal its powers of alteration” (Viveiros de Castro 2011:145). Difference and reality are fused in this view that “ontology is an attempt to take others and their real [sic] difference seriously. . . . The turn to ontology is thus . . . a powerful move to re-inscribe difference into the very heart of the world—or at least into the heart of anthropological method” (Candea in Carrithers et al. 2010:175). Why there is any need to reinscribe something so taken for granted on all sides is unclear, but this certainly represents a view that “since anthropology is centrally concerned with alterity and since alterity is a matter of ontological rather than epistemological differences, it follows that anthropology must reflect upon its modus operandi in ontological rather than epistemological terms” (Holbraad 2009:82).

It is important that I be as clear as I can at this juncture. I am not saying that an interest in difference is misguided. Alterity is extremely important as a feature of existence, as a condition of knowledge production, and as a politics. It is central to a range of postcolonial, feminist, antiracist, and queer interventions, among others; it is key to my own work. Notions of ontological difference run through a set of conversations from Heidegger to Derrida as well as through vitalist arguments, shaped by thinkers from Simmel to Deleuze, that “all being is difference” (Lash 2005:2). Nor am I saying that similitude puts us on safe ground. Similitude too easily invoked can appear as universalization and standardization. But there are other ways to invoke similitude, and difference can be invoked in ways that manifest as exoticization and fragmentation.

Of concern, then, is how difference is framed and deployed. With regard to interpretive approaches, we know that “cultural difference needs to be dislodged from its position as the enabling principle of ethnography and turned into the very phenomenon in need of historical explanation” (Bunzl 2004:440). But ontological difference is no less in need of dislodging and explanation.

At present, the ontological turn pivots on the axis of difference. What if we remove the bolt?

Many scholars involved in the ontological turn do problematize difference—for example, by noting that “if anthropology stands or falls by its capacity to register difference in its own terms, then it must find a way to stop delimiting the scope of difference by deciding in advance what it must look like” (Holbraad in Blaser 2013:563). This has included a concern that, if the goal is “engaging with non-Euro-American ontologies . . . [anthropologists] probing European or American forms of life . . . would once again end up out in the cold” (Candea 2011:146). By this measure, digital anthropologists would freeze at absolute zero—precisely when they can contribute to understanding the reality of online cultures and their offline implications.

If the ontological turn pivots around a bolt of difference shared with its epistemological foil, the danger is a form of closure, rather than an extension that opens to new conceptualizations of the human and parahuman. One reason I do not cast my intervention in the language of critique is that such language has largely served to further rotate analysis around the bolt of difference.

Given that the conflation of ontology with difference shapes understandings of the real, it also shapes understandings of politics (recalling the English phrase “to make a difference”; see, e.g., Blaser 2009). It is incomplete to claim that “domination is a matter of holding the capacity to differ under control” (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen, and Holbraad 2014). There is ample evidence that domination can also work through holding the capacity to be similar under control—an incitement to alterity. For instance, this has been a feature of many forms of colonialism in which subjects were defined via tribal difference so as to thwart nationalist movements (Mamdani 1996).

Without a language of similitude as well as difference, it is difficult to articulate a political ontology outside “radical al-

terity and exoticification . . . [which] constitute . . . some of the primary ways that anthropology has been put to use outside of the academy for all the wrong reasons and in all the wrong ways” (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:63). Without explicitly addressing “what kinds of difference are allowed to matter” (Bessire and Bond 2014:442), the risk is “rendering as political the ontological turn’s own methodological commitment to the constant production of difference . . . tak[ing] the very fact of differing as political [such that] nothing is political” (Candea 2014). In terms of both politics and the real, removing the bolt of difference means that, instead of “turning back” to epistemology, we reframe knowledge and being in terms of practices of world making and possession. It means considering an anthropology of similitude as one element in theorizing ontology itself.

### From Laboratories to Archipelagoes

I have mentioned only in passing work seen as part of an ontological turn in STS. Such scholarship broadens the discussion in terms of fieldsites studied and also draws helpful attention to the role of material arrangements and technologies (e.g., Cussins 1996; Pickering 1993). Yet, despite being quite distinct from the ontological turn in anthropology, the two turns share some features (Jensen 2014; Mol 2014).<sup>5</sup> In particular, both pivot around the bolt of difference: “the turn to ontology in STS can be better understood as another attempt . . . [to attend] to the multiplicity and degrees of alterity of the worlds that science and technology bring into being” (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013:322–323). As in anthropology, politics is thereby articulated primarily through difference, an “alter-ontological politics” (Papadopoulos 2010:178), though here as well the equation of ontology with difference is contested (Lynch 2013).

An increasing number of scholars associated with the ontological turn in anthropology have suggested greater interdisciplinary engagement with such STS work by recognizing that a focus on indigenous Amazonia and Inner Asia is due to “professional trajectory and experience rather than to an implicit claim that there is an inherent association [with ontology]” (Blaser 2013:553), so that “there is no limit to what practices, discourses, and artifacts are amenable to ontological analysis” (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen, and Holbraad 2014). This opens the door to a broader comparative discussion, and it is in this context that I now draw briefly on my research in Indonesia and Second Life. As noted in the introduction, engaging with my virtual-world fieldwork seems logical given my interest in discussing the digital real. Yet I begin with my Indonesia fieldwork (see particularly Boellstorff 2005, 2007a), precisely be-

cause these issues of reality must be linked to physical-world field sites as well.

Consider how, since the 1970s, a growing number of Indonesians have used the terms *lesbi* or *gay* to refer to at least some aspect of their subjectivities. As in all my published work, I italicize these terms, because they transform the English terms “gay” and “lesbian;” they have their own trajectories and implications and are “really” Indonesian concepts.<sup>6</sup> *Lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians can be found across Indonesia, the world’s largest archipelago and fourth-most populous nation. Most are middle class or of lower socioeconomic status and have never met a Western gay or lesbian person.

During fieldwork, I was struck by how these Indonesians often linked their same-sex desire to a sense of sameness with *lesbi* and *gay* Indonesians across the archipelago. In other words, while they might identify as Javanese or Balinese with regard to kinship, religion, or any number of other domains, they identified as Indonesians with regard to their sexualities. They also frequently highlighted indirect, partial connections to gay and lesbian persons transnationally, as if Indonesia was one island in a global archipelago of queer subjectivities and communities, linked through grids of similarity and difference. They would identify such national and global linkages while fully cognizant of colonial histories, contemporary inequalities, and differences between *gay* men and *lesbi* women. This was not a veneer of unreal similitude masking real difference.

These assertions of similitude (with regard to same-sex desire and social world) challenged my anthropological predilection for difference as the goal of ethnographic inquiry. Was it contamination, or even false consciousness? Learning to appreciate that similitude for these Indonesians was transscalar—constituting subjectivities, national imaginaries, and global connections—reminded me that ontologies are produced, not found, countering the “neglect of . . . the infrastructures that facilitate the exchange of perspectives” in some (but by no means all) ontological-turn scholarship (Maurer 2013:69). At the risk of overly flamboyant theoretical gyrations, I might characterize this as archipelagic perspectivism, a view predicated on worlds understood as archipelagoes and thus as ontological assemblages defined in terms of exteriority, not bounded shores (Escobar and Osterweil 2010). Islands of difference in seas of similitude, reefs and atolls that are sometimes islands and sometimes not, affected by climate change, currents, and the inhabiting work of everything from humans to microscopic coral.

### Toward an Ontology of Similitude

Non-Euclidean geometry, the foundation of much contemporary mathematics, arose from exploring what happens if we

5. A detailed bibliometric analysis of the ontological turn in STS included no citations of Descola, Holbraad, Pedersen, Strathern, or Viveiros de Castro but did reveal some “evidence of a turn in other fields towards notions of ontology specified by STS scholars” (van Heur, Leydesdorff, and Wyatt 2012:342).

6. Due to limitations of space, I focus on similarities between *gay* men and *lesbi* women and will not discuss the transgender subject positions *waria* and *tomboi* (or *priawan*).

set aside the parallel postulate that parallel lines never meet. Even this brief discussion of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians suggests how setting aside the ontological turn's difference postulate might enable other theorizations of being, things, worlds, and the real. This does not entail treating similitude as a balance or analogue to difference; doing so would construe similitude as the alter to difference and thus remain tethered to the bolt of difference itself. Rather, it means theorizing historically specific grids of similitude and difference. Building on some ontological-turn work and earlier scholarship that inspired it (e.g., Strathern 1991; Wagner 1977), what might constitute a theory of ontology that contextualized alterity within such an analytic?

One place to begin is by noting how some work related to the ontological turn adopts "a basic prescription of structural analysis that acknowledges that sets of phenomena can be brought together, not in spite but in virtue of the differences they exhibit, differences that one then attempts to order and to systematize [along] 'axes of difference'" (Descola 2014:435). Loosening the bolt of difference might facilitate adopting structural analysis in a more comprehensive manner—to wit, recognizing that sets of phenomena are brought together not only along axes of difference (in syntagmatic relationship) but also along axes of similitude (in paradigmatic relationship). This bringing together of phenomena (which Saussure termed "value") is "always composed of a *dissimilar* thing that can be *exchanged* . . . and of *similar* things that can be *compared* . . . both factors are necessary for the existence of a value" (Saussure 1959:115). This would move the ontological turn closer to the structuralist foundation that represents one of its basic prescriptions—by highlighting how similitude, as much as difference (indeed, in generative conjunction with difference), is at the core of being and worlding.

Some observers of ontological-turn debates have asked after this very conjunction, questioning why "everything is about difference, rather than about sameness" (Werbner in Carrithers et al. 2010:185) and suggesting that we "look at anthropology as the project of understanding what it means to be human and put both similarity and difference within that ongoing experience" (Glick-Schiller in Carrithers et al. 2010:192). An important insight in this regard is that a focus on difference "is in no way incompatible with the obvious observation that alterity is hardly an all-encompassing predicament, and that the people we study are in all sorts of ways eminently comprehensible to us" (Holbraad 2012:249). However, theorizing the digital real does require rejecting as incompatible the idea that similitude is obvious. Eminent comprehensibility cannot be treated pretheoretically; the sorts of ways it manifests through grids of similitude and difference must be included in the analytic frame.

Some observers have also noted that the "discussion of what we actually share . . . is dwarfed in . . . the ontological turn's highlighting of difference" (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:57). Consider how, in the indigenous Amerindian data that has strongly informed work to date in the ontological turn, "ontological pre-

paration appears to be the crucial idiom. . . . The relative and relational status of predator and prey is fundamental" (Viveiros de Castro 2004:480). *Gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians are just one example of persons whose subjectivities, shaped by a desire for the same, allow theorizations of ontology alongside this predator/prey relationship of difference. Such theorizations do not necessarily originate in an ostensibly homogenizing modernity; for instance, in Māori cosmological accounts, "the *a priori* ontological condition is sameness [and] difference has to be generated" (Salmond 2012:122). Similarity is serious, too.

Rather than predicate ontology on difference, we can theorize difference and similitude together in an archipelagic style, where difference is internal and relational. After all, both the English term "archipelago" (derived from Italian) and the Indonesian term "nusantara" refer not to islands but to the waters connecting them. Difference laps at the shores within; there is no *a priori* exterior to an archipelago. This reflects how "alterity is never a dissonance between two autonomous cultures any more than it is a dissonance between two autonomous ontologies. Decades of postcolonial critiques should by now have sensitized us to this fact" (Fowles in Alberti et al 2011:907).

Some scholars have criticized ontological-turn scholarship for "skipping over an entire generation of anthropologists that took up these same problems and worked them out in very different ways" (Bessire and Bond 2014:441) or because "decades of [relevant] work in STS is being disdainfully discarded" (Mol 2012:380–381). I do not find these critiques entirely accurate; much ontological-turn scholarship carefully builds on earlier work, and one can never name all possibly relevant bodies of research. But it is undoubtedly the case that attention to ethnographic interplays of difference and similitude can enrich the conceptual repertoire brought to bear on these questions. This is one reason why "perhaps the time has come to move beyond not only the relational anthropology upon which 'ontological turn' ethnographies have hitherto been so dependent, but also the idea of 'radical alterity'" (Laidlaw and Heywood 2013). This means not a nonrelational anthropology (an impossibility in my view) but reframing relationality in terms of both similitude and difference.

This attention to similitude has political implications. Given that "the political axis [in politics of ontology debates] is about enabling difference to flourish against the coercive powers of sameness" (Battaglia and Almeida 2014), questioning the assumption that difference is the axis around which a political ontology must turn permits addressing the possibility of the coercive powers of difference and the implications of enabling similitude to flourish as a politics. Similitude is not always an inauthentic mischaracterization: it can be ontologically real and linked to a politics of equality, coalition, and mutuality. While it is certainly legitimate for the "ontologically minded anthropologist" to be concerned that "in making accounts equivalent as enactments, we are doing sameness and leaving no way out for our interlocutors, partners and circumstantial political foes who would not describe their accounts as enactments" (Blaser 2014), a more comprehensive theorization can address how doing dif-

ference can also leave no way out for interlocutors. Without accounting for similitude and difference, analyses can overlook “the possibility of a shared ontology or interpretive framework. . . . Focusing on ‘worlds’ rather than ‘worldviews’ claims to deny a form of conservative ethnography that in fact is perpetuated by this radical essentialism” (Geismar 2011:215). A move to “worlds” is, so to speak, neither here nor there: it does not inoculate analysis from the “ontological barriers which anthropology inherited from nineteenth-century primitivism” (Pina-Cabral 2014b:159). Similitude can involve the erasure of specificity, and for this, among other reasons, we must be vigilant regarding its deployment. But when notions of the public good are challenged by ideologies that atomize citizens into self-interested, rational individuals who are members of incommensurable cultures, the incitement to difference merits scrutiny too.

There are methodological implications as well. If the Other is radically different, what are we to make of using the term *gay*, wearing blue jeans, or updating Facebook profiles? Even if such things are considered in terms of “how persons and things could alter from themselves” (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen, and Holbraad 2014), the analysis remains bolted to difference, and there is no space to consider these things as similar to themselves. In other words, “the postulate of multiple ontologies, in its most radical form, seems to erect insuperable barriers between different parts of people’s present worlds” (Keane 2009). The extension of difference between Self and Other to within Self is still an analytic bolted to difference, often containing the implication that “it is only by seeing the other as absolutely different that we can approach the ethnographic field unprejudiced” (Vigh and Sausdal 2014:55). Yet ethnography depends on similitude too: “anthropologists regularly remind us of the hazards of translation. . . . But I have yet to hear of an anthropologist who returns from the field announcing that she could understand nothing about the people she was studying” (Lloyd 2011:837; see Keane 2013).

This is why I respectfully disagree with Holbraad’s self-assessment that he “in past writings made the mistake of associating the notion of ontological difference with the image of multiple worlds” (Holbraad in Blaser 2013:563). In my view, Holbraad’s association of ontological difference with multiple worlds is valuable (not mistaken) if clarified in two respects. First, multiplicity is not isomorphic with difference: multiplicity can, in some cases, produce similitude (as I discuss below with regard to imitation and repetition). Second, a notion of multiple worlds is not necessarily mistaken, because, depending on your definition of “world,” such worlds are not just images but realities (Law 2011). To assume otherwise contributes to the mistaken view that the digital is not real.

### Virtual Worlds and the Digital

It is intentionally only at this point, two-thirds of the way through the argument, that I weave my Second Life fieldwork into the analysis. Some scholars have written two-part articles

to great effect (e.g., Pina-Cabral 2014a, 2014b; Sahlins 2011a, 2011b), but the limited space of the article genre helpfully compels choices. I have elsewhere written on my virtual world fieldwork and the methods used to accomplish it (e.g., Boellstorff 2011, 2012, 2015; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor 2012). Here, I draw briefly on this work to highlight some ways it speaks to the ontological turn and difference.

Virtual worlds are forms of online socialities, which also include social network sites like Facebook, mobile phone apps, texting, blogs, e-mail, games, and streaming video. These phenomena differ and constantly change but also have more perduring and broadly shared characteristics (for instance, the notion of “friending” someone or “flagging” objectionable content; Crawford and Gillespie 2014). Scholars involved with the ontological turn have asserted that “[i]f we are to take others seriously [sic], instead of reducing their articulations to mere ‘cultural perspectives’ or ‘beliefs’ (i.e. ‘worldviews’), we can conceive them as enunciations of different ‘worlds’” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007:10). Virtual worlds can help broaden the conversation regarding what an enunciation of worlds might entail.

One source of confusion lies in the polysemy of “virtual,” which can refer to potentiality; that meaning shapes my analysis (Boellstorff 2015:34), but I here emphasize the digital dimension of the virtual. In this respect, the most distinctive feature of virtual worlds is that they are places, which underscores how not all online phenomena are media. Virtual worlds do not mediate between places; they are places in their own right that persist as individuals log into and out of them. They exist even if no one is currently “inworld,” whether they take the form of online games or have a more open-ended character, as in the case of Second Life.<sup>7</sup> Residents of this virtual world, which had around a million active residents at the time of my fieldwork, could join for free and engage in almost any imaginable activity—from business meetings to watching movies, from dancing to sex, from creating a medieval city to constructing a suburban housing development or a space station. Objects, parcels of land, and services could be offered freely or sold for Linden Dollars (convertible to US dollars). Through these activities and social relations, residents created a world within which they could interact, not only in a synchronous manner, but also asynchronously (for instance, by starting work on a house and logging off, with another resident logging on to work on the house an hour later). Second Life was structured to permit anonymity or continuity between online and offline identities. It allowed for avatar embodiment in which characteristics such as gender, race, and age could be changed at will and as often as one wished, and avatars could even take the form of an animal or object.

7. The name “Second Life” can misleadingly imply separation from a “first life,” assumed to be physical. Had Linden Lab, the company that owns Second Life, kept the original name of Linden World, its character as a virtual world would have been more clear.



Residents of virtual worlds teach us that they are real places that must be understood in their own terms. Consider a hypothetical group of four Second Life friends who, in the physical world, are located in France, England, the United States, and Brazil and who meet regularly to dance in a virtual disco. To demand that an ethnographer fly to all these countries would be not just impractical but inaccurate (Jensen 2010). The persons in question are not meeting in the physical world; given the principle of “follow the people” (Marcus 1995:106), participant observation should occur in the real place of Second Life. Meeting these persons in their physical-world locations could be useful for a range of research questions as well, just not as an assumed vantage point of privileged access to the real.

Virtual worlds must be understood in their own terms, but these “own terms” include influences from beyond the virtual-world context. The reality of our hypothetical group of Second Life friends in the virtual disco is shaped by time zones, language skills, cultural logics, and the speed of internet connections and chips as well as by the materiality of computers, server farms, and bodies. But these influences do not “blur” the gap between virtual and actual, a point of commonality with other forms of online sociality. For instance, if someone living in Chicago posts on Facebook, it is misleading to assert that this posting is located “in Chicago,” even though that is where the poster’s physical body is located (or “in Dallas,” should that be where the server storing the posting is located). If 15 friends responded with comments, their activity would not be located “in Chicago”; these friends may not even live in Chicago. They could be posting while walking on a street with a mobile device or even while using a tablet on an airplane at 30,000 feet. In the sense of social action, these activities occur “on Facebook.”<sup>8</sup> The online sociality is real not in an exhaustive or privileged sense but in a perspectival sense.

What does it mean to say virtual worlds are real (Brey 2013)? “In real life” is a phrase that has been well known since the earliest days of digital communities. Second Life residents would sometimes use this phrase informally yet insist that Second Life was real, an assessment found in other online contexts (Boellstorff 2015:20–24, 237–240; Markham 1998:115; Taylor 2006). “Real life” often acted as a shorthand for “physical world,” “not role playing,” or “not gaming.” Persons who used these phrases clearly knew that role playing could occur in Second Life or in more gaming-oriented virtual worlds, like World of Warcraft, but that it could also take place with physical-world friends in a living room using paper and dice. Reality is not an exclusive property of the online or offline. Residents were aware that, if they learned something in Second Life, that knowledge could be used in the physical world. They

8. This issue is not unique to the online: if conducting fieldwork with a group of *gay* Indonesians meeting in an urban park, it would misrepresent the reality at hand to insist that an ethnographer also travel to San Francisco or Amsterdam, even though notions of homosexuality from the West shape the social reality under consideration.

knew that, if they fell in love with someone, those feelings could have physical-world ramifications. They knew that money spent inworld was real money (a reality on which the technology industry depends).

The reality of virtual worlds is shaped by their status as persistent contexts of social immersion. One source of confusion involves the distinction between virtual worlds and “virtual reality,” which typically refers to sensory immersion using devices like 3-D goggles. Virtual worlds can involve virtual-reality technology, but this is not necessary; most residents of virtual worlds access them via a computer screen or mobile device, and many contemporary virtual worlds, like Minecraft, have less graphical “realism” than do virtual worlds that came before them. On the other hand, virtual-reality technology can be used with a flight simulator run from a single computer not connected to the internet; this is not a virtual world, because it disappears when the computer is turned off.

By not assuming reality is exclusive to the physical, the framework I have in mind here would not treat the digital as a “lossy” approximation of the analog. This is an understanding of the gap between virtual and actual as real precisely because it is a space of connection and alteration—a space of mutual possession—rather than a teleology from online to offline, as if from spirit to flesh. It is not that virtual worlds are potentially real, but that they are additional realities.

### Having, Being, Knowing

I strive to engage with the ontological turn in the register of conversation, not critique, because it provides resources for theorizing the reality of the digital if reframed so as not to pivot on the bolt of difference. My experience with virtual worlds and other online socialities, key aspects of which are summarized above, has led me to realize that one promising avenue toward this reframing lies in the notion of “having” developed by Gabriel Tarde. The work of this contemporary and rival of Durkheim already influences ontological-turn scholarship—directly or via Deleuze, who found in Tarde that “the perpetual divergence and decentering of difference [corresponds] closely to a displacement and a disguising within repetition” (Deleuze 1994:xx; see Toews 2003:91).

Clearly, I do not have space for exploring Tarde’s thought in depth. For my purposes here, what is crucial is this notion of repetition, through which Tarde insisted that difference is not ontologically prior to similitude. This stems from the place of imitation in his social theory: “the social being, in the degree that he is social, is essentially imitative. . . . society undoubtedly existed before exchange. It began on the day when one man first copied another” (Tarde 1903:11, 28). This view of sociality as imitative can be placed in productive dialogue with work on mimesis that has a long tradition in anthropology and beyond (Auerbach 1953; Benjamin 1979; Bhabha 1994; Caillois 1984; Frazer 1915; Taussig 1993).

Imitation is a relation of similitude that preserves difference: it causes “both social similarities and dissimilarities” (Tarde

1903:50), so that “represented similarity is what gives birth to difference” (Karsenti 2010:72). Tarde conceived of such represented similarities, the stuff of imitation, in terms of a “‘suggestive realm’ as an ontology of the social” (Blackman 2007: 579; see Leys 1993). Reflecting nineteenth-century interest in hypnotism, he asserted “society is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism” (Tarde 1903:87).

This “analytical line running from Tarde to Deleuze” (Sampson 2012:8) via repetition, imitation, resemblance, and somnambulism reframes difference in terms of possession as an alternative to being. This is typified in a passage oft cited by scholars engaging with the ontological turn:<sup>9</sup>

All philosophy hitherto has been based on the verb *Be* . . . if it had been based on the verb *Have*, many sterile debates and fruitless intellectual exertions would have been avoided. From this principle, *I am*, all the subtlety in the world has not made it possible to deduce any existence other than my own: hence the negation of external reality. If, however, the postulate *I have* is posited as the fundamental fact, both that which *has* and that which *is had* are given inseparably at once. (Tarde 2012:52)

Tarde sees an analytics of being as fostering an inaccurate division between real (equated with the Self) and unreal (equated with the external Other). His alternative of having “obviates . . . precisely this opposition between self and other” (Candea 2010a: 126). As an ontology of mutual possession, it is consonant with his broader theory of repetition and imitation: “Tarde rejects the idea that something can exist beyond the relations which constitutes it as such” (Vargas 2010: 213). Appreciating the potential of this framework requires “avoiding from the start the wrong step that consists of considering the philosophy of Having as a bizarre variation of possessive individualism” (Vargas 2010:230). We have known since Hobbes that liberalism and capitalism are linked through the idea that a specific notion of possession, in the form of property, confirms being (Maurer 1999; Radin 1982). Tarde’s more hypnotic understanding of possession presumes a dyadic relation (indeed, a kind of a digital relation) where “that which has” and “that which is had” are inseparable yet distinct. This is emphatically not a decoupling. A gap connects them—a connection possible precisely because the category of the real is not exclusive to either side.

A gap connects them. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida developed the notion of “hauntology” to theorize contemporary implications of this gap in terms of a “frontier” instituted in “the medium of the media themselves . . . tele-communications, techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele-iconicity” (1994:50–51). Derrida does not cite Tarde in this argument, but his invocation of a spirit possession in the context of digital ontology certainly recalls Tarde’s interest in “having” rather than “be-

ing” as the foundation of human worlds understood in terms of “social somnambulism” (1903:85). What Tarde offers is a way to conceptualize a grid of similitude and difference: a gap is necessary for imitation, repetition, and resemblance. Tarde gives us a vocabulary for a relational coming-into-being that recalls spirit possession or hypnotism more than “possessive” individualism.

In search of alternatives to the bolt of difference, we might seek inspiration from Tarde to posit alongside hauntology a “habeology” (from the Latin *habeo*, “to have,” another conjugation of which is *habitus*). With this term, I am considering a “metaphysics of Having” (Vargas 2010:229) in which it is possible to theorize grids of similitude and difference in a way that treats similitude not as obvious but as equally in need of explication. Habeology troubles the notion of radical alterity, because having something implies some link of similitude as well as some distinction of difference. And troubling the notion of radical alterity through possession opens a space for treating the real not as a property that the digital lacks but as a relation that may or may not manifest in virtual contexts—or actual contexts, such as in the unreality of play where “the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (Bateson 1972:153).

I am gesturing here toward possession and imitation as possible alternatives to the bolt of difference. Similitude alone cannot play this role, because it simply represents a further “turn” around the bolt in question (and because, as I have emphasized, an interest in difference is not misguided, only incomplete). A more fully developed habeology of the social might provide tools for rethinking being outside a presumed tropism of reality toward difference. This might open valuable lines of inquiry for considering the reality of the digital. To take just one example: rather than considering avatar embodiment to be unreal in comparison with the reality of the physical body, avatar embodiment can be understood as real in two ways. First, it is one way subjects can possess virtuality. Second, avatar embodiment (like all embodiment) is always a form of emplacement; it emerges through the mutual possession of virtual bodies and virtual places (see Boellstorff 2011).

## The Real Stakes

In “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam,” Bruno Latour claimed “a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path. . . . The question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them” (2004:231). His remedy was an empiricism that could show how “Reality is not defined by matters of fact . . . [they are] very partial . . . renderings of matters of concern.”

In this article, I have eschewed critique as a theoretical and affective stance and sought to stand outside the “turn” metaphor. My engagement is one of productive extension; I frame my intervention as engaging with a body of work just gathering steam. The ontological turn represents a diverse scholarly conversation that can speak to an emergent paradigm in digital theory that takes reality as its matter of concern.

9. For instance, Candea (2010:125), Latour (2002:129), Vargas (2010: 212), and Viveiros de Castro (2003).

My goal has been to think outside the bolt of difference that currently anchors the ontological turn to the epistemological framework it rejects, deepens, or extends and which limits the ontological turn's analytical purchase regarding the real. If being is difference and the physical is self-evidently real, it is hard not to conclude that the digital, to the extent it is not physical, is unreal. In a context where the offline is increasingly experienced as the temporarily not online, rethinking this inaccurate conclusion is of the utmost theoretical and political importance. The digital is not linked to the real because it "simulates" the physical: many forms of online practice and sociality are unconcerned with simulation. Indeed, we live in a world where it is quite common for the physical to simulate the digital, as in forms of offline social interaction that draw norms, assumptions, or even networks from the online (like a "meet up" of persons in the physical world whose primary interactions are digital). The category of the real is not a point of distinction between the digital and the physical: as indicated by my digital reality matrix, either can possess it.

Removing the bolt of difference in favor of a more expansive attention to grids of similitude and difference can help ontological-turn work speak more effectively to questions of the digital real. More broadly, removing this bolt helps align our conceptual apparatus with the modes of practice and becoming through which being and knowledge are mutually constituted. In other words, the framing of current anthropological work on ontology as turning on difference does a disservice to its own potential.

Rather than a turn from epistemology to ontology (and inevitably, back to epistemology), I wonder about a kind of Heisenberg principle that could allow for the possessive coconstitution of ontology and epistemology as fact and perspective, like a photon can be a wave or a particle. Meaning is ontological—enacted in representational practice. "Epistemological-turn" scholarship can be quite eloquent on this point: "The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as that of rocks on the one hand and dreams on the other—they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said" (Geertz 1973:10).

"Import," in Geertz's sense, speaks to world-making processes of meaningful realization, to the "practices of abstraction and specification that create and set in order distinctive epistemological and ontological domains" (Zhan 2012:109). By questioning "the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent" (Barad 2003: 804), we can develop forms of onto-epistemology, "the study of practices of knowing in being" (829)—what Foucault termed a "historical ontology of ourselves" that asks "how are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge" (1984:49). This "challenges any attempt to erect barriers between something that can be called the real, material, or physical world and something else that can be called thought, discourse, or nar-

rative" (Alberti in Alberti et al. 2011:905); it is an approach predicated on the idea that "how we represent the world around us is in some way or another constitutive of our being" (Kohn 2013:6). This is important because "talking about reality as *multiple* depends [not on the metaphors] of perspective and construction, but rather those of intervention and performance. This suggests a reality that is *done* and *enacted* rather than observed" (Mol 1999:77, cited in Blaser 2013:554), "an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets" (Derrida 1994:51).

Inspired by these lines of analysis, I proffer habeology as a way to understand reality as enacted through having, through possession across constitutive gaps of both difference and similitude. I seek to extend the insight that "[the language of ontology] acts as a counter-measure to a derealizing trick frequently played against the native's thinking, which turns this thought into a kind of sustained phantasy, by reducing it to the dimensions of a form of knowledge or representation, that is, to an 'epistemology' or a 'worldview'" (Viveiros de Castro 2003). To construe something as a worldview need not be a reduction; at issue is precisely that epistemology need not be derealization.

Challenging the derealization of the digital is of pressing importance. The perspectival insights of ontological-turn scholarship, if not predicated on the bolt of difference but instead framed in terms of "having," might destabilize the logic of adequation—*intellectus et rei*; how does thought correspond to reality?—in favor of a processual framing of being and knowing. Such a habeological perspective can underscore how the "ontological question" (Evens 2012:5) is a question of reality and difference: "unless, then, we are prepared to suspend our received notion of reality—that the world must be perfectly identical to itself—we are in no position to take full advantage of the ethnographic encounter with otherness" (Evens 2012:5).

Our era of the Anthropocene is now a "Digitocene" as well. We live in a digital age where the relations between online and offline can have positive impacts on everything from inequality and belonging to climate change but can also have negative impacts in these domains—an "Anthroscene" (Parikka 2014). It really matters, and conceptualizing the reality of this mattering will shape how, for good and ill, we in technology transform our actual worlds.

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## Comments

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The Water Integrator was an analog computer created in the Soviet Union in 1936. It was designed to solve differential equations using a mechanism that might astonish many of us today: a hydraulic apparatus of pipes and tubes that, through a system of valves, pumps, and sluices, would manipulate volumes of water through a network of channels and holding chambers. Water levels in different chambers stood for different numbers in the computer’s memory, and the flow of water between chambers enacted and represented mathematical operations that could change those values.

What makes the Water Integrator an analog computer is the one-to-one correspondence between a physical quantity (water levels) and a matching value (a number). Digital computation, by contrast, transforms a series of discrete, encoded values (typically, the zeros and ones of binary) into higher-order representations (e.g., e-mails, PDFs, spreadsheets, and YouTube videos) that have a conventional and arbitrary—not continuous or isomorphic—relation to those anchoring values.

Which kind of computation attaches its processes more firmly to “reality”? The one—analogue—that uses real water to represent correlating quantities or the one—digital—that uses discrete voltage patterns to generate abstractions? One answer might be both or neither, since numbers are as abstract as any quality, and qualities are as real as any abstraction. Asked in the other direction, does there exist a difference between the “reality” of the numbers delivered by the Water Integrator and the “reality” created in a digital realm (say, World of Warcraft) conjured out of the computation of discrete quantities? The answer, again, is that it depends, for—as Boellstorff persuasively argues—reality is, above all, an interpretative relation, not a property that inheres as such in particular things, materials, media, or formats. As Boellstorff puts it, we should not “treat the digital as a ‘lossy’ approximation of the analog” but rather treat this mode of representation as supporting realities of its own, ones that “may or may not manifest,” that may solidify or fracture through convention and contest. The real or the ontological is, as Boellstorff elegantly argues, an achieve-

ment, an arrangement of relations (see also Kockelman 2012; Smith 1996).

One worry did creep over me as I read through Boellstorff’s tour de force of synthesis, intervention, and theorizing, and that was that he never quite defined “the digital.” I came to see, however, that Boellstorff, ethnographically and expertly tuned to today’s practice and usage, was taking as read a by now everyday acceptance of “the digital,” one that has it as a synonym for computationally supported online venues and processes of social interaction. I decided, too, that my worry was beside the point, since Boellstorff’s insight about reality as relational works as well for analog as it does for digital. This is to say that Boellstorff’s argument is so persuasive that it might not need “the digital” to work.

But this raises a historical question for me and pages me back to ethnographic work I conducted in the 1990s among computer scientists who claimed that the “digital organisms” they programmed within computer models of evolution were real organisms in virtual worlds (see Helmreich 1998). Looking back at the claims of these scientists through the lens of Boellstorff’s argument makes me a bit uneasy. While a relativist attitude would happily accept that a digitally real biological ontology precipitated from these scientists’ work, such an account would miss the ways these people’s “digital real” depended upon a rhetorical erasure of their own interpretative work, upon what Diana Forsythe once called the “deletion of the social” (2001). It may be difficult to remember, in these social-media days, that “the digital” was once quite ideologically sealed off from “the social” (Hayles [1994b] called the result “ontological closure”). The “digital real” is a shifting, historically situated social phenomenon.

The “social” is central to Boellstorff’s definition of ontology. Boellstorff defines ontology as posing “questions of being—‘who are we?’,” immediately making “ontology” not about such ahuman entities as, say, rocks—the preoccupation of another branch of ontological scholarship, thing theory (see Brown 2001)—but rather about identity and belonging, about being as existing as a subject/creature/critter/agent.

And that is the key to why Boellstorff proposes, via Tarde, habeology—being through mutual interpretative possession—as an alternative to ontology. This is a very useful intervention and might even be ported back to make sense of those scientists who once believed in digital organisms. Scientists in “artificial life” held they had created real digital life in part because of the “holding power” of computationally rendered realms, zones into which they could project hopes and fantasies (Turkle 1984). Habeology, then, becomes about having and holding, about—permit me a moment of habeological camp—a kind of marriage. For artificial-life folk, the reality of digital organisms actually often arrived through the most normative, patriarchal heterosexual reproductive vision of marriage; digital organisms were rhetorically animated through imagery of a “male programmer mating with a female program to create progeny whose biomorphic diversity surpasses the father’s imagination” (Hayles 1994a:125; or, in a schoolyard idiom, programmers loved their



computers so much that they wanted to marry them). Marriage, of course, can subtend many other sorts of relations (see Maurer 2015 on how to think of individual and corporate relations with “big data” as akin to marriage arrangements that require exchange of bridewealth), and the “historically specific grids of similitude and difference” that made analogies between heterosexual procreation and computer programming persuasive for some people in the 1990s have quite fallen apart. Digital organisms have become less, not more, “potentially real,” and Boellstorff can help us see why.

From a less heteronormative and less anthropocentric view—where “to marry” refers to the grafting of vines in viticulture—the having and holding of the digital (or, indeed, analog) real may be about how ontology manifests through the grafting together of social commitments and technological affordances (and see Winograd and Flores 1986). The holding chambers of the Water Integrator held within them an ontology of number, of quantity and quality, married to a particular reality by the interpretative conventions of mathematicians. The Water Integrator, like today’s digital computers, operated something like an oenophile in front of a flight of wine, working through sequences of conventionalized pairings of vocabulary and phenomenological experience to pronounce on the real. Boellstorff teaches us that ontology, channeled through habeology, can turn water into wine, digital and physical into real or unreal, transforming the very networks of similitude and difference through which we calculate the qualities and quantities of our worlds.

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### Graham M. Jones

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This beautiful essay intervenes simultaneously in two heated anthropological conversations—one about the ontological turn, the other about what we might as well call the virtual or digital turn. Boellstorff reveals unexpected potential for generative interillumination between these two areas of concern, motivating his discussion by critically examining the dualistic, from-and-towards logic of the “turn” metaphor. Following in the gleeful spirit of flamboyant gyrations, I might recall that, since the era of nineteenth-century mass culture, “turn” has also had another meaning: an item of entertainment, strung together in the spectacular show-length progressions of American vaudeville and British music hall. Could this additional meaning also be relevant to the topic at hand?

I very much like Boellstorff’s move to emplace intellectual currents he considers, associating the reflexive turn with (the idea of) California and the ontological turn with (the idea of) Cambridge. However, I might emphasize a different, more inclusive, kind of situatedness: the diacritical definition of the real in respect to the virtual as an intellectual commonplace in Euro-American ontologies. For reasons that are clear enough,

Boellstorff deemphasizes culture as an explanatory concept and does not invoke ideology at all, but the recurring dichotomizations of the real and the virtual that he describes clearly present us with powerful, culturally specific “media ideology” (Gershon 2010). This ideology places the real and the virtual “on a zero-sum continuum such that every step ‘from’ one is a step ‘to’ the other,” as Boellstorff nicely phrases it, with authenticity, value, and meaning presumably increasing or decreasing in corresponding increments.

Boellstorff’s “digital reality matrix” gives us an elegantly persuasive way to visualize precisely the kinds of interpretive possibilities occluded by conflating the physical with the real, on the one hand, and the digital with the unreal, on the other. As Boellstorff shows, it can be very difficult for scholars of digital culture to prevent these pervasive ideological associations from creeping into their analyses. In addition to the salutary habeological approach he advocates, Manning and Gershon (2013), who similarly draw inspiration from the ontological turn, suggest using the trope of animation to break down real/virtual binaries. Building on a multimodal view of human interaction (Keating 2005), linguistic anthropologists have focused on the way that people coordinate the use of different channels, simultaneously and sequentially, to accomplish communicative practices that they may construe as more or less real, regardless of whether those channels are proximate or mediate, analog or digital (Jones 2014).

But whether it is possible to achieve what Latour calls a “symmetrical anthropology” (2007) of communication that treats all channels as ontologically equivalent remains to be seen. For my part, I wonder whether the real/virtual binary will not always somehow be with us, insinuating itself as an implicit rationale for anthropological research seeking either to reveal that “online” sociality is really real or that naturalized, normative forms of “offline” sociality are deeply artificial—even if the valences are ultimately reversed. Perhaps the best we can hope to do is treat these binaries ethnographically, which at times may require “turning anthropology into an ethnographic object” (Herzfeld 1987:23), as a Euro-American discipline that has often been responsible for reifying such ethnotheoretical distinctions; hence Dominic Boyer’s (2013) call to reflect upon anthropology’s own “informatic unconscious” as the ethnography of digital culture comes into its own.

An archeology of anthropological approaches to virtuality could productively begin with Edward Sapir (1931:78), who articulated an early, fairly sophisticated account of the relationship between “primary processes” of communication associated with face-to-face verbal interaction and “secondary techniques” of mediation that enable interaction across distances of space and time. For Sapir, the primary processes reach their fullest form in the intimate settings of primitive tribes and nuclear families; secondary techniques, such as literacy or telephony, emerging “only at relatively sophisticated levels of civilization,” increase “the sheer radius of communication” while lessening “the importance of mere geographical continuity” (80). (Clearly his ontology precluded human medium-

ship.) Sapir foresaw that the expansion of these secondary techniques would “profoundly modify our attitude toward the meaning of personal relations” in ways that Boellstorff is now calling for anthropology to take fully into theoretical account.

Sapir did not distinguish between primary and secondary forms of communication in terms of reality and virtuality, but he did posit a relationship of antecedence and subsequence and corresponding clines of intimacy, depth, and authenticity. He also articulated a vision of social life as inherently imitative, in which culture only exists insofar as people engage in communicative behaviors that others copy. Boellstorff, following Tarde, asserts the conceptual value of imitation and similitude as a way to get around the impasse of difference that anthropological approaches to ontology always seem to presuppose. For Sapir, however, imitative sociality became problematic when coupled with secondary techniques of mediated communication, producing dehumanizing, herdlike behavior. Elsewhere, he lamented that genuine culture “reaches its greatest heights in comparatively small, autonomous groups” (Sapir 1924: 425), but the “admirable machinery” of modern civilization can only produce ersatz “canned culture” (429) that is bland, homogeneous, and passively consumed.

The expressive diversity and agentivity emergent in digital culture prove decisively otherwise, as Boellstorff’s (2015) own watershed ethnography of *Second Life* attests. Although it may not be his primary intention, Boellstorff incidentally also shows in this article that developing something approaching a symmetrical anthropology of digital culture is also part of an ongoing process of displacing the discipline’s inbuilt predilection for theorizing from the perspective of “comparatively small, autonomous groups,” particularly when they are taken to embody an implicit ideal ontological alterity or, for that matter, communicative immediacy. This also means making legitimate ethnographic and theoretical room for the kinds of mass entertainment, play, and now even gamified work (Jones et al. 2015) that flourish not just in digital culture but in cosmopolitan, postindustrial settings more broadly—even if it is difficult to do so without recourse to countercultural or subcultural tropes of quasi tribal alterity.

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#### Morten Axel Pedersen

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It is a pleasure to comment on Boellstorff’s timely piece. For whatever one might think about the details of his depiction of the ontological turn (OT), it has the merit of drawing upon a real reading of this literature. Boellstorff, along with other recent comments on OT (e.g., Bille 2015; Kohn 2015; Morita 2013; Salmon 2013, 2014), actually seeks to critically engage with questions of ontology, as opposed to dismissing the notion that anthropology can and should be concerned with such

questions at all. Still, while I sympathize with Boellstorff’s project—including the ambition to extend anthropological preoccupations about ontology to decidedly nonindigenous arenas of social life and human existence (e.g., Jensen and Winthereik 2013; Knox and Walford 2016; Krøijer 2015; Nielsen 2011; Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012; Walford 2015)—I do have some issues with it.

For one thing, it seems to me that Boellstorff at times presents an oversimplified or even reified version of OT in his attempt to forge a distinct position for himself within these debates. This is clear, for example, in the dubious separation he makes between “relationalists” such as Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern and OT (when in fact they are theoretically deeply intertwined, if not inseparable; cf. Holbraad and Pedersen 2016); and in the suggestion that ontologically informed analysis often relies heavily on “virtuosos” (when, in fact, several such accounts, including my own book *Not Quite Shamans* [2011], deliberately and very explicitly are concerned especially with cultural nonexperts). My other reservation concerns Boellstorff’s claim that OT, since it focuses on “radical alterity,” is incapable of dealing with questions of sameness. Given that this is also the main point in Boellstorff’s paper, I shall here concentrate on discussing this issue.

So, is OT really unable and unwilling to understand sameness? To address this question, it is relevant to point to a persistent misunderstanding in anthropological discussions about ontology, be they digital, indigenous, or what have you—namely, what might be called the fallacy of the one or the many. I refer to the tendency to conflate OT’s methodological focus on difference and alterity (opposed to similarity and identity) with a metaphysical preference for the many as opposed to the one. This is a fatal misunderstanding of OT, which turns on a deeper conflation of the contrast between “extensive” and “intensive” relations and differences (Bialecki 2012; de Landa 2002; Deleuze 1994; Holbraad and Pedersen 2009). For the moment that relations are conceived of as intensive as opposed to extensive, which is what OT’s “methodological monism” (Pedersen 2012a) is all about, then the distinction between the one and the many—and derived binaries between, for instance, individual and society, one culture versus another culture, and paradigmatic axes of similitude versus syntagmatic axes of difference—cease to make sense (after all, as Deleuze’s famous maxim goes, “pluralism = monism”; Deleuze and Guattari 1999:20). Instead, we are faced with a postplural object of study that infinitely folded inward and outward, suspended between the radical contingencies of fieldwork and the radical reflexivity of the anthropologist. Far from choosing between the one and the many, the binary between the one and the many is thus substituted by a multitude of “partial connections” (Strathern 2004). Which is why the differences and alterities that are at stake in OT, at the end of the day, are not between things but within them (Holbraad and Pedersen 2016; Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014).

Thus understood, the question of difference versus similarity is not a zero-sum game, as Boellstorff seems to think (in,

say, suggesting to “loosen the bolt of difference” and describing difference/similarity as organized in a “grid”). For the moment that the stuff that sociocultural worlds consist of is heuristically conceived of as intensive and “self-scaling” (Wagner 1991) in the manner alluded to above, the distribution between difference and similarity does not take the form of an economy of scarcity, where the two are imagined to be competing over a finite amount of reality (the old structuralist mistake Wagner and Strathern taught us how to avoid). Rather, the relevant anthropological question becomes one of quality and aesthetics. We need to ask not how much difference and similarity there is in a given relationship but what kind of difference and what kind of similarity are being instantiated through this particular relationship and, as a necessary corollary of this task, whether the concept of “the relation” is, in the long run, adequate to properly account for these qualities (c.f., Candea 2010*b*; Corsin-Jimenez 2007; Pedersen 2012*b*; Stasch 2009).

Boellstorff is correct, then, in stressing that similitude should be treated “not as ‘obvious’ but as equally in need of explication,” and he is also right that an “anthropology of similitude” must constitute “one element in theorizing ontology itself.” Surely, pursuing an ontological approach must also involve taking people very seriously when they say that they are similar, perhaps even radically similar, to another, as indeed some of my Mongolian interlocutors do (Pedersen 2011:104–107). But where Boellstorff errs is in his insistence that we need to render our concept of difference less “radical,” as if by doing so our conception of similitude would automatically receive a boost. For that, as I am sure he agrees, is far from the case: nothing good is going to come out of backpedaling to obsolete binaries (e.g., between the one and the many, between identity and alterity, and between ethnography and theory). Moving forward is the only option. And in the present case, this can only mean that the concept of sameness itself needs to be radicalized or “intensified” along the same postplural lines as has already been done with the concept of difference. For only by doing so will we be able to explore questions of similitude, not by applying a pre-given concept of what sameness is, but with the theoretical open-endedness needed to ask: what could similitude be in a given ethnographic context?

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#### Amiria Salmond

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Tom Boellstorff observes that much anthropological writing about lives lived online reproduces an a priori (that is, ontological) opposition between “the digital” and “the real”—one that continues to haunt theories of technology. In working toward a new analytic that could admit digital realities, he seeks inspiration—and finds it—in recent debates about ontology. I will turn to his take on those discussions in a moment, but I would first remark that, as a leading figure in the field of digital

anthropology, he might equally have turned to ethnography. Among this field’s rapidly expanding literature, there may indeed be a tendency to treat digital and real worlds antithetically; yet there are also many studies and analyses questioning the relevance of such contrasts in a variety of ethnographic situations. It would have been useful to see this argument laid out in relation to those wider and already well-advanced conversations in which Boellstorff is a prominent participant. I am thinking, for instance, of work on gaming communities and social media; publications on hacking, open source software, and internet freedom; and experiments in indigenous digitization. Here many discussions—not least on the ownership and policing of digital artifacts, including code, surrogates, and information in a multiplicity of digital forms—have drawn attention to the political, ethical, and sociological effects of these technologies both online and offline. Together they offer rich resources for calling the idea of an ontological apartheid between the digital and the real into question.

Boellstorff’s point is important, not least since the theoretical languages deployed in this work—like all terminologies—come deeply embedded with ontological implications, even as we seek to reach through them toward other ways of thinking, acting, and being. Analytics for talking about digital technologies derive from centuries-old debates on the status—ontological, theological, and political—of things like images, records, and surrogates as well as the repetition and imitation he discusses. Relational contrasts between digital and analog modes of transmission invoke scales of time and space, conjuring degrees of distance and abstraction from an original source. Media denotes the intermediary function of shifting more- and less-abstracted information from one position on these scales to another. Aside from assembling ethnographic accounts that challenge the workaday connotations of these terms, then, there is certainly grosser work to be done in unsettling conceptions built into the very analytic languages we use to discuss what might conceivably count as real relations, real social lives, and real experience, and this is where Boellstorff turns toward ontology.

I am sympathetic to this impulse and agree that ontological debates have much to offer those seeking to open anthropological analysis to the unanticipated: to people’s real lives being played out online, for instance. Of course, anthropology has always sought out that which unsettles expectations—why else conduct fieldwork, if not to be surprised and to have one’s assumptions challenged?—but I see in aspects of the ontological turn a systematic effort to stay surprised: to resist the temptation to explain away that which differs from the expected as something that can, after all, be assimilated to familiar categories. Instead of trying to encompass and domesticate what unsettles us with recourse to universal theories, the part of the ontological turn that interests me seeks to approach such differences as relational—different to, different from—and to see where that methodological commitment might take us. The hope is that, in denying the urge to account for everything in terms of concepts that are already to hand—as if every possible

kind of difference had already been foretold—we will open ourselves further to ethnography’s potential to challenge us at every level.

The degree to which other anthropologists share this commitment continues to be debated: certainly ethnography is often harnessed to projects designed to reconfigure ideas and relations—notably those of inequality—but such initiatives are often pursued as proselytizing endeavors that aspire to a new and improved world order—even a new ontology—as if this would guarantee better lives for everyone. I cannot emphasize enough that the ontological turn, as I understand it (certainly the “recursive” part of it with which Boelstorff is here primarily concerned), has quite different aims. Far from insisting on alterity as “a foundational presumption regarding the nature of being,” the recursive ethnographers’ interest in difference is methodological; put simply, it arises from anthropology’s unifying characteristic as a discipline dedicated to comparison.

When these scholars talk about alterity, they are not pointing to differences within or between “sets of phenomena” out there in the world per se but to relational contrasts produced in acts of comparing one set of purported commonalities with another (whether linguistic, cultural, social, ethical, political, religious, biological, sexual, personal, or whatever). Their “native thought” and “indigenous ontologies” are thus (for analytic purposes) artifacts of their own and others’ comparisons and attempts at description, analytic essays designed to open anthropology to the transformative potential of that with which it seeks to compare itself and which, on that methodological basis alone, is always other. In this sense, it is a category mistake (and a common one) to read difference in these scholar’s work as similitude’s dark twin, the opposite pole on a single scale used to measure humanity. Difference here is rather the relations of (non)comparability that generate that scale, among others; it is the analogies and contrasts we and our interlocutors are always making—ongoing experiments whose effects can neither be easily controlled nor reliably predicted.

Difference, so defined—as continually emerging out of meetings, encounters, and interactions and the comparisons to which they give rise, rather than given in any a priori sense—could, I suppose, be described as the “bolt” on which (this part of) the ontological turn turns; but it would seem to me an odd choice of metaphor. An alternative might be to think of comparison as something like what electricians call a “potential difference source” (examples include batteries, friction, and turbulence in clouds) that gives direction to a current’s flow, thus producing movement, light, sound, and so on. Difference would then be the “charge” generated as a relation within or between “materials,” which a physicist would measure in volts. Difference, then, not as the “bolt” around which the ontological turn swings in a perfect circle but as the “volts” charging its capacity to lend momentum (and *son et lumière!*) to diverse anthropological enterprises.

In terms of the digital real, recursive approaches do not offer much traction to the project of “correcting [the] misrepresenta-

tion” in contemporary theories of technology “regarding the reality of the digital.” Why not? Because this particular set of ontological arguments (unlike others) does not aim at correcting modernist scholarship’s ontological errors but seeks, rather more modestly, to highlight some of the effects of the prevalence of certain kinds of comparisons (notably, modernist ones) on ethnography. Far from proposing a new metaontological order—a world of many worlds (including digital ones), for instance, in which all difference is relational—recursive approaches advance a prospective methodology pursued strictly in the subjunctive tense. These scholars address themselves not the question “what is?” but rather “what if [things were like this]?” What could be (or, after Tarde, what could have or be had) if things including difference were done differently? What concepts, practices, and modes of existence might emerge from as yet unanticipated relations generated out of our comparisons? And what politics could become possible through the effort not to foreclose on that which is not yet conceived, even that which is yet inconceivable?

Exponents of recursive approaches have thus argued that seeking to hold the question “what is?” open as a matter of methodological principle does not amount to an abdication of interest in or responsibility for “real world” conditions (Holbraad, Pedersen and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Pedersen 2012a). I agree. Nor do I find that refusing to act as arbiters of how things really are commits these scholars to a *laissez-faire*, “anything goes” form of relativism in which all possible worlds and relations are equal (Paleček and Risjord 2013; Salmond 2012). On the contrary, I see great potential in recursive arguments for helping to build new devices and infrastructures that could allow as yet unanticipated forms of politics—including emancipatory ones—to emerge. True, the effects of such transformations are unpredictable, but there is surely greater potential to bring about change in opening anthropology further to that which challenges our expectations than, as Boelstorff too argues, in foreclosing on the very idea of ontological difference from the start.

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## Reply

I am deeply grateful for these fascinating comments. They provide a welcome opportunity to expand aspects of my argument; I apologize that space allows me to respond to only some of their insights.

Helmreich correctly identifies my analytical focus on human realities, which is due to both disciplinary interest and space limits. I share his goal of placing questions of digital relationality in conversation with analog realities. In this regard, I have been powerfully influenced by his stupendous work on simulated digital worlds, which examines how digital realities can depend on a rhetorical erasure of interpretive work. But is this dependency relation inevitable? When interpretive work is



rhetorically acknowledged, can the digital remain real? Helmreich inspires me to consider this question of interpretive work as ontological work. I return to Helmreich at the end of this reply, but for now let me highlight his observation that “ontological closure” is a historically situated ideological effect. Under what conditions of possibility might this closure not manifest?

Jones’s “vaudevillian” turn helpfully foregrounds aspects of my argument related to communication, media, and performance. Work like that of Manning and Gershon (2013) on animation can contribute to analyses of the digital/real relation consonant with a habeological approach, particularly with reference to the possession and enactment of embodiments that are always emplacements as well.

I appreciate Jones invoking Sapir’s distinction between “primary processes” of face-to-face verbal interaction and “secondary techniques” of mediation. This distinction partakes in deep-seated assumptions of “face-to-face” sociality that still shape the presumptive opposition of digital and real. In contemporary work, this “principle of false authenticity” has been effectively challenged by the understanding that “people are not one iota more mediated by the rise of digital technologies” (Miller and Horst 2012:11–12). Sapir is clearly articulating a media ideology, which links to contemporary work on language ideology and points to the potential value in framing dichotomizations of the real and virtual in terms of “digital ideology.”

Given his attention to ideology, it is understandable that Jones asks, “Will the real/virtual binary always be with us?” I share his appreciation for the persistence of cultural logics: this binary is multiply overdetermined, not least by a pervasive Christian metaphysics. On the other hand, people around the world (not just wealthy elites) increasingly have everyday experiences of the online as real. My goal is not to predict the future but to weaken the conceptual hold that this binary holds over such a wide swath of social theory.

Jones appreciated my “move to emplace intellectual currents [I consider], associating the reflexive turn with (the idea of) California and the ontological turn with (the idea of) Cambridge.” In this spirit, we can turn to Salmond and Pedersen, who, unlike Helmreich and Jones, are both Cambridge-educated and more directly engaged with the ontological turn.

Salmond claims that ontological-turn analyses frame difference as “methodological” insofar as “it arises from anthropology’s unifying characteristic as a discipline dedicated to comparison.” This demonstrates Salmond’s sociological location, because it is not a “unifying characteristic.” I can invoke Leach again to recall that “British social anthropology is . . . concerned with the *comparative analysis of social structures*” (1961:1). Comparison has been important to other anthropological traditions, but Salmond’s assumption that it is “unifying” reveals the unacknowledged situatedness of her analysis. For instance, the American tradition has been influenced by Boas’s “doubt of the possibility of establishing valid categories for the comparison of cultural phenomena” (Stocking 1974:13).

Seeing comparison as one valuable aspect (not a “unifying” aspect) of anthropology allows us to reframe Salmond’s incorrect claim that, when ontological-turn scholars discuss alterity, “they are not pointing to differences . . . out there in the world per se but to relational contrasts produced in acts of comparing.” Contra Salmond, some ontological work in both anthropological and STS domains speaks explicitly of not just differences “out there in the world” but different worlds. One reason this scholarship is helpful for addressing questions of the digital is the multilayered interest in (1) difference “out there,” (2) difference in acts of comparison and analysis, and (3) both a priori and a posteriori forms of difference established and sustained through analytical and political relationships between 1 and 2.

These clarifications will prove helpful in responding to Pedersen, whose comments misrepresent my argument and are crafted in a gatekeeping register. One manifestation of this is his tendency to revoice contextual claims as absolutes. My discussion of “ontological-turn work and earlier scholarship that inspired it” becomes a “dubious separation . . . between ‘relationalists’ . . . and OT.” The observation by myself (and others) that this scholarship “often draws on a ‘virtuoso’s point of view’” becomes a claim it “relies heavily on ‘virtuosos.’” The observation by myself (and others) that this scholarship has focused on difference becomes a claim it “is incapable of dealing with questions of sameness.”

This third revoicing links up to Pedersen’s most significant (and instructive) misreadings, which revolve around difference and similitude. In particular, he claims I “conflate OT’s methodological focus on difference . . . (opposed to similarity . . .) with a metaphysical preference for the many as opposed to the one . . . a fatal misunderstanding of OT.” Let us bracket the language of “fatal” misunderstandings (yet another example of rhetorical gatekeeping) and treat generously obfuscations like “faced with a postplural object of study that infinitely folded inward and outward, suspended between the radical contingencies of fieldwork and the radical reflexivity of the anthropologist.” (We are not talking about a singular object of study that could possibly be “postplural” in a Strathernian sense; I know my Deleuze well enough, thank you very much, to have no clue what is meant by an “infinitely folded inward and outward” object of study, and I have no idea why he frames this in terms of “radical reflexivity” when, as Salmond notes, “recursivity” is more germane.) Pedersen usefully reminds us that notions of monism and pluralism are important to some ontological-turn scholarship. However, it misrepresents this scholarship’s past and present to claim that the focus on difference is purely methodological. It is clearly “metaphysical” as well, in part because it is often immanent to the ethnographic context, as reflected in Pedersen’s own conclusion that “the differences and alterities that are stake in OT, at the end of the day, are not between things but within them.”

Note how Pedersen’s conclusion contradicts Salmond’s conclusion that these differences are in service of comparison. Both perspectives are extant in ontological-turn scholarship—

though this is obscured when the scholarship is acronymized (ontologized?) into a singular “OT” and its history recounted in a Whiggish fashion. These multiple perspectives are one reason I agree with Pedersen on the value of non-zero-sum frameworks for conceptualizing difference and similitude. This agreement is masked by Pedersen’s claim that “the question of difference versus similarity is not a zero-sum game, as Boellstorff seems to think.” My empirical claim that the turn from epistemology to ontology has largely remained bolted to difference is not a normative claim that this must remain so. Indeed, my ruminations on archipelagic difference and habeology are just two ways that I work to build on excellent insights of ontological-turn scholarship that exceed zero-sum frameworks.

Pedersen’s view that I insist “that we need to render our concept of difference less ‘radical’” is thus erroneous. Beware of scare quotes: I never use “radical” with regard to difference in this way, nor do I speak in a unilinear fashion of “more” or “less” difference. Instead, when discussing habeology, I speak of “troubling” the notion of radical alterity. I do not insist that we need to render our concept of difference less radical; were I to speak in such terms, I might say that we need to render our concept of difference less ontological.

In his classic discussion of the “real,” J. L. Austin termed it a “trouser-word” for which “it is the negative use that wears the trousers. That is, a definite sense attaches to the assertion that something is real . . . only in the light of a specific way in which it might be, or might have been, not real” (1962:70). There might be value in extending such an analysis to “difference” in relation to similitude. Recalling Helmreich’s observation that artificial life programmers often saw the reality of the digital as achieved via normative visions of marriage, we might queer these conceptual trousers and consider how visions of marriage and difference might “fall” were their premises destabilized (Boellstorff 2007b).

Rethinking understandings of difference holds great promise for forging a better conceptualization of the digital real. Placing bodies of scholarship in conversation with each other can help mightily in this regard but only if gatekeeping is set aside in favor of careful reading and generous engagement. In this sense, all four of these commentators illustrate how the unavoidable and valuable location work of anthropological analysis includes us, the anthropologists, just as much as those we study. Questions of the digital will only become more salient to the discipline. In our era of big data and algorithmic living, it is crucial to demonstrate the contributions anthropology can make to understanding digital cultures and their very real consequences.

—Tom Boellstorff

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